

Unplanned Reactions

If a baby is unsettled and a poor sleeper, an allergy or intolerance to something in mum's diet passed on through breast milk could be the underlying cause, writes Joy Anderson.



Your baby is awake and crying again for another breastfeed! And even if carried all the time, he or she will still cry. Other babies you know don't seem to be this demanding. And perhaps there is also a rash that spoils the cute baby photos that you want to take lots of.

Does this sound familiar? In some cases, these problems could be caused by what you are eating. You don't have to be eating lots of 'junk food' and artificial additives for this to happen, although it is a good idea to avoid too many of these if you can. Food intolerance can arise from eating the healthiest of foods, such as dairy products, wheat and fruits and vegetables.

My son had dreadful colic from day three of his life, all day every day, for five full months. I was told it would stop at three months and felt very cheated when this didn't happen.

Health professionals I consulted didn't really seem to understand what it was like to live 24 hours a day with a screaming baby, and they had no real advice on how to stop it. What I didn't know at the time was that my baby's misery (and mine!) was being caused by food intolerance, from substances in foods I was eating coming through my breast milk.

I also had too much breast milk, caused by the frequent feeds my baby wanted due to his pain. He fed for the comfort of the sucking; I don't think he ever got to the point of actually being hungry. However, he didn't gain weight as normal and was not back to his birth weight at three weeks. He also had symptoms of lactose intolerance: very frequent bowel motions, often explosive. The milk seemed to be going straight through him.

I have since learned that there is a lot of confusion between lactose intolerance and food intolerance, especially when they occur in breastfed babies. Some people wrongly think that they are the same thing.

Some babies appear to have lactose intolerance, but are putting on weight well. This simply means that they are getting too much breast milk. Often, mothers think they don't have enough milk because the baby is so unsettled, but if the baby is having lots of bowel motions each day and passing urine more than about 10 times a day, this is oversupply. However, if the baby appears to have lactose intolerance and is not putting on weight, this is usually caused by damage to the lining of the intestine, perhaps from a bout of gastroenteritis, from a food allergy or food intolerance. Lactose intolerance just means that the baby doesn't have enough of the enzyme needed to digest lactose, the sugar in milk. If this is caused by damage to the digestive tract, then the aim should be to find out what is causing the damage, not just to avoid lactose. Fix the cause of the damage and the lactose intolerance will fix itself. Breastfed babies who show symptoms of lactose

intolerance should always keep breastfeeding, except in the rare case where the baby is losing weight.

You may see now that a baby can have both food intolerance and lactose intolerance. This leads to more confusion if the baby is reacting to dairy products in the mother's diet. Dairy products have both dairy protein and lactose in them. It is the protein that is causing the problem. Some mothers are told to avoid lactose in their diets, but this cannot affect their baby, as the lactose in breast milk does not come from the mother's diet; it is made in the breast itself. However, if the baby is reacting to the protein, by avoiding dairy products his or her mother might still have hit on the solution to the problem by chance.

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Salicylates are common in lots of healthy foods, especially many fruits and vegetables and are also present in high levels in herbs and spices. They are higher in less-ripe fruits and in the skins of fruits and vegetables.

Amines are formed when proteins break down, so are found in fermented, 'matured' or aged foods. Also, they increase in fruits as they ripen. Examples of foods high in amines are tasty cheese, very ripe bananas and aged meats. Chocolate is also high in amines.

MSG enhances the flavour of food. As well as the MSG added to some foods, it occurs naturally in many tasty foods, such as soy sauce and tomato products.

There are a number of foods that are high in all three of these chemical groups, such as mushrooms, tomatoes, grapes, processed meats, yeast spreads, stock cubes, wines and sauces.

When someone is allergic to a food, they have to strictly avoid even traces of it. It is different for food intolerance, where a little bit might be okay but if you eat too much, you get a reaction.

It is also useful to know that it can be hard to distinguish between reactions in breastfed babies due to allergies and those due to intolerances. Allergic reactions are much more subtle when a baby is exposed to the allergen via breast milk and are similar to reactions caused by food intolerance.

In food intolerance, the substances seem to have a drug-like effect on the nervous system, so are very different to the immune-system reactions of an allergy. Common symptoms of food intolerance in adults and children are stomach aches, diarrhoea, constipation, reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, mouth ulcers, rashes, headaches, low mood, aches and pains, sleep disturbance and behaviour problems in some children.

Many breastfeeding mothers notice that if they are not used to eating spicy foods and they eat a hot curry, their babies seem unsettled the next day. All spices have high levels of food chemicals, especially salicylates. The presence of these chemicals in the breast milk when the baby is mildly sensitive to them may be enough to cause problems. Some babies are even more sensitive, so everyday healthy foods might be too much because of the amounts of salicylates coming through the milk. A similar pattern can occur with dairy products, soy and/or wheat products.

Some mothers can solve their babies' problems by avoiding too many foods with artificial additives and also foods that are very 'tasty' and highly coloured. If a mother tries to eat mostly fairly bland foods without strong natural colour, she may find her baby is more settled.

A dietitian with a special interest in food intolerance, particularly in babies, can help a breastfeeding mother investigate her diet. An individualised plan, which is based on family-symptom information, will be made

for an elimination diet for about four weeks. If the baby settles in that time, the mother will then 'challenge' the baby by eating selected foods high in just one type of food chemical. This is repeated with different types of food, and the reactions of the baby noted. In this way, the mother can see which foods she needs to avoid.

There are numerous reasons why babies cry or don't sleep well. As I have explained, one that may affect some breastfed babies is the mother's diet. Diet may also cause problems when the baby begins to eat solid foods. Professional assistance from a dietitian with a special interest in this area can help a mother minimise how much she needs to restrict her diet and ensure that she is getting all the nutrients she needs for herself and her baby. ■

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